



DELIVERING YOUR PRESENTATION

HOME SEARCH RESOURCES DAILY IT NEWS

►CREATING ▼DELIVERING ►TECHNOLOGY

SPEAKING TIPS
THE AUDIENCE
THE ROOM



NEC



Sponsor

Crystal Graphics



Motivating the masses

by Dave Zielinski

If you are a presenter, you are in the motivation and persuasion business, whether you like it or not. Knowing what motivates people (and what doesn't) is a big part of your job. Hear what the experts have to say about improving your motivational prowess in the office and at the podium.

Every year, companies spend millions of dollars hiring people whose job is to get up in front of people – any crowd, anywhere – and motivate them. Every day, millions of executives, salespeople, trainers and teachers step up to the podium with one goal in mind: to motivate or persuade people in their audiences to take what they are saying to heart and act on it. And every day, every year, millions more walk away from these encounters completely unmoved or unchanged in any way, grumbling about what a waste of time it was.

Whose fault is it?

Some say the traditional motivational speech should be accepted for what it is – a short-lived jolt, an invigorating change of pace or even an entertainment reward for hard-working employees – and that problems only arise when people try to make it something it's not. Others believe that if companies intend to continue spending employees' valuable (and increasingly scarce) time on mass motivation, they are obliged to provide their people with something more permanent and more nourishing than a freshly opened box of Girl Scout cookies.

"Real motivation is much more than antics on a lecture platform, more than bellowing into a microphone," writes Saul Gellerman, a business management professor and internationally recognized motivation expert, in his book, *Motivation in the Real World* (Dutton Books, 1992). "Real motivation is the serious, never-ending task of creating conditions to which the natural response of ordinary people is to accomplish extraordinary things. Motivating people is extremely hard work that takes thought, attention to detail, know-how and, perhaps above all, flexibility to individual differences."

Science and sloganizing

Volumes have been written about what motivates audiences sitting in auditoriums and employees working in cubicles or on factory floors. The scientific research on the subject could fill a few Amazon.com warehouses. Every week someone seems to come out with another management self-help book on motivation. The models are plentiful: positive and negative reinforcement, antecedents and consequences, intrinsic and extrinsic factors, the "sandwich" theory (slip a thin slice of criticism between two slices of praise), attribution theory and management theory X and Y.

We generally know people to be motivated for three basic reasons, though: to avoid some acute pain in their lives, to gain some form of what they define as pleasure or to respond to a specific driver-state or emotional condition at a given time.

We also know that one person's motivation is another's empty slogan or cheerful idiocy. We are unique beings triggered in vastly different ways, with idiosyncrasies that

demand, to the extent possible, customized, what's-in-it-for-me appeals, not recipes or one-size-fits-all propositions. A motivational approach that relies primarily on tugging heartstrings might resonate with people in certain human-relations professions, but lawyers, engineers or scientists hearing the same thing might well cry, "Where's the beef?"

"Nothing works all the time. People are too varied and complicated for that," writes Gellerman. "Instead, some techniques work some of the time. There's no magic to motivation, no miracles, no amazing results. Anyone who promises you any of these is either a naive fool or a con artist."

Compliance vs. commitment

Scott Lee, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Kirkland, Wash., who studies the psychology of influence between speakers and audiences, believes attempts to influence from the podium fall short for plenty of reasons, but the most common is the presenter's "failure" to build an "emotional bridge" to the audiences.

Lee believes fundamental change or influence – a consistent change in behavior coming from a concrete change in belief – happens primarily on the right side of the brain, and attempts to influence should lean heavily to that area. While the brain's left side is designed to pick apart logic in arguments, approaches targeting the right side of the brain – personal stories of failure and challenges overcome – "travel through most filters straight to your gut, belief system and world view, and that's where true change takes place," Lee says. "You have to first soften an audience before you can shape it, to create receptivity to a new message. It's harder to do than citing research or data." But Lee acknowledges that connecting emotionally with an audience doesn't guarantee you'll lead them anywhere. People can always be persuaded to do something in the short term if you wave a big enough stick, Lee says, but it's far more difficult to get them to *believe* something and then persuade them to act on that belief. It's the difference between compliance and commitment. Successful organizations know that committed employees outperform compliant ones every time.

Motivating from within

Speakers don't have the power to motivate anyone; they only have the power to create conditions that enable people to motivate themselves, says Marilyn Mobley, a former IBM executive who heads her own consulting company, the Acorn Consulting Group in Marietta, Ga. Mobley, who does plenty of motivational speaking, also makes use of the philosophy behind an old sales maxim: People don't buy because they are made to understand; they buy because they feel understood.

"Motivation comes from the listener, and the presenter's job is to use compelling examples and personal stories that connect with the audience in a real way and give them something they can take away for their own lives," Mobley says. "All we as speakers can do is share experiences we've had that motivated or taught us in some way and trust the audience members to figure out for themselves what motivates them from that message." Indeed, Mobley often finds that audiences often extract messages from her stories that she never intended or didn't recognize herself.

Mobley also knows that what motivates or inspires one person might fall flat or ring hollow with another. She tells a personal story about having a kidney transplant, getting pregnant and then having to choose between keeping the baby and having a second kidney transplant. Women tend to respond deeply to her story, but men, although sympathetic, tend not to have the same visceral reaction.

Keep the challenges coming

Motivational speaker Jim McCormick knows his "reason-based" approach to motivating audiences swims a bit against prevailing tides and targets audiences less inclined to respond to an overtly emotional appeal: scientists, attorneys, engineers and high-end sales people, for example.

McCormick, a world-record-holding sky diver who has parachuted into the North Pole, helps people and organizations improve performance and avoid "plateauing" by becoming more effective risk-takers. His pragmatic approach takes the form of a promise or calculation: If the audience members do A and B, they will experience C and D. "The emotion-based approach is wonderful for those who respond to it, but it's never worked for me, likely because of my engineering and MBA background," McCormick says. "I'd rather have someone make a very reasoned, almost airtight argument to me, and that's in turn what I try to do for

my audiences. They're willing to embrace my risk-taking message, but only if I have a credible, irrefutable argument for it."

The importance of getting real

Unlike presentations that lean heavily on cutting-edge content, comparative data or new research to convince or sway audiences, which often require presenters to don the exalted "expert" hat, Mobley believes her success at motivating or inspiring depends largely on how well she positions herself as a content expert *and* as an equal. "For audiences to truly relate, you need to be make yourself a bit vulnerable up there," she says. "You need to be willing to tell stories in which you're not the hero, when you failed or made a mistake and somehow bounced back. I think that's what more people relate to and are inspired by these days."

Indeed, according to "For Motivational Speakers, Nothing Succeeds Like Failure: Those Willing to Divulge Their Defeats Are in Demand, Can Draw Fat Fees" in *The Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 16, 2001), failure is trendy as a motivational speech topic. In the wake of a faltering economy and vanishing dot-coms, audiences are embracing real-world stories of how people coped or bounced back from some professional or personal setback and lessons learned along the way. Mobley herself is developing a speech called "The Stupidest Things I've Done as an Entrepreneur."

"When you stride up to the stage in front of thousands of people, there's this air that you're superior to them," Mobley says. "But when you begin to talk about some stupid things you've done or life plans that haven't gone so well, the [listeners] start to think you're one of them."

The only difference is, you have a bit more nerve to get up on stage and tell the world about it."

Gauging an audience's latitude of acceptance

Positioning yourself that way is among the best ways to build that all-important bridge to the audience, says psychologist Scott Lee. A number of psychological studies suggest and experience confirms that "you can't truly lead anyone until you've walked alongside them," he says. Lee says most audience members have a natural "latitude of acceptance" of any new message – that is, limits on how much their belief

systems can be shifted on a continuum from a one-shot presentation (a limitation some presentation sponsors conveniently overlook). Furthermore, presenters must first gauge where an audience stands before attempting to move it anywhere. If the goal is to improve highly technical professionals' understanding and application of human psychology or interpersonal relations, you should first ask them to rate their understanding or belief on a scale of one to 10 – with the inward-looking techno-wonk at zero, and the technophobic empath at 10. If most put themselves at four on the scale, Lee says the most a speaker might realistically hope to move them is one-and-a-half or two points, to about six on the scale. That's their latitude of acceptance.

"If you shoot too high on belief change, you not only might lose an audience, you may move them on the scale in the opposite direction of your intentions," Lee cautions.

When Lee was invited to speak to employees who test software for a living, a presentation sponsor believed Lee might help these testers – who had been engaged in interpersonal bickering and conflicts that were hurting productivity and performance – become immediately more amicable on the job. But Lee knew one presentation alone was simply a starting point, a way to spark interest and set the table. He could leave some reinforcing tools and ideas for the group to apply during the course of the following year, but realistically, such change in entrenched behavior usually requires a constellation of interventions that might include training, ongoing coaching and reinforcement and new compensation schemes or incentives.

Let's make a deal

McCormick believes audiences are increasingly cynical and therefore resistant to motivational messages, because they've been exposed to too many sessions that produce limited or no lasting results. He takes a slightly different tack to the challenge of sustaining change. First, he strikes a deal with audiences: If they're willing to take certain risks and follow concrete steps laid out in his presentation, he promises them they will, with great certainty, experience specific long-term outcomes and rewards.

In a recent half-day presentation to 700 independent life-insurance agents, for instance, McCormick encouraged the audience to "intentionally do things differently than in the

past" to meet new organizational and personal goals. The general advice was followed with a battery of specifics. Step one: The agents' own risk-taking should begin with trying to interest their established property and casualty insurance customers in life or health insurance. "That can be a difficult step – most everyone needs insurance for their home or car, but life insurance can be a tougher sell," McCormick says.

He then laid out incremental steps to sustain agents' efforts toward the new goal:

- Commit to a certain life insurance sales target, and ask a colleague to hold you accountable.
- If you don't already have one, obtain a securities license or certified financial planner designation to increase your ability to sell an expanded product line.
- Learn to use existing software on laptops that can greatly enhance and streamline the sales process – software many of the technophobic agents have shied away from using.

What are McCormick's promised outcomes for agents who take these steps? An increase in short-term and long-term income, the satisfaction that they'll be securing the financial futures of more of their clients, the recognition of peers for being among the best in their field and the personal rewards of their own risk-taking breakthroughs.

This approach requires McCormick to customize his message more than the average motivational speaker does, but he wouldn't have it any other way. "Any time any of us has the honor of speaking to an audience, we have enormous responsibility because we're using that company's most valuable asset: employee time," he says. "If I'm given 700 people for 60 minutes, that's 700 work hours, which is a valuable and expensive asset. We need to maximize our impact in that time, and the only way I can think of doing that is by heavily customizing my work."

People don't argue with their own data

Another theory holds that the most effective way to influence and motivate is to present information, arguments or data in ways that allow audiences to draw their own conclusions. The "people don't argue with their own data" approach rests

on the belief that we're far more convinced by our own experiences than we are by what someone else tells us to be true.

Anne Warfield, a certified speaking professional and outcome strategist with Impression Management Professionals in Minneapolis, frequently uses this approach in her consulting and presentation work. She often encounters some audience resistance when talking about the importance of projecting a good visual image in the corporate world; most people naturally want to be judged more on their inner selves than outer selves. But in making a point about "what should be" versus "what is," Warfield wants participants to create their own "aha" reactions.

"Instead of trying to unilaterally persuade them about the impact of a person's looks, I want them to experience it for themselves," she explains. So she created an exercise. She projects onscreen the images of two different males, each of whom, Warfield tells the audience, is a suitor of a particular woman. She then asks audience members to pair up and jot down their impressions of the two men based only on physical appearance, including dress. Warfield then polls the entire group to capture audiencewide perceptions, which tend to be remarkably similar for both men. She then shows a slide summarizing how audiences around the world have described these two men during the past 10 years, which usually coincides with the current audience's impressions. The exercise may not change bedrock right vs. wrong belief systems, but the process of "creating their own data" validates for participants the importance of visual appearance to other peoples' perceptions.

Warfield also believes it's critical that leaders or speakers have more than a passing knowledge of the personality types they're trying to motivate or influence. One-size-fits-all approaches usually fail, she says, so Warfield tailors her motivational strategies to four broad personality types:

- **the connector**, who values stability, getting along, and private or low-key recognition
- **the networker**, who values team activities, gets energy from others, thrives on public recognition
- **the producer**, who seeks control over his own life, is a good organizer and planner, and is self-motivated

- **the analyzer**, who gets value from data accuracy, prefer facts, figures and reasoned arguments over personal stories.

"It's important, especially as the leader of a team or work unit, to speak from the employee's perspective and to find out, by asking, what does or doesn't motivate each person," Warfield says. "What's most important to them? Is it a sense of stability or private recognition? Teamwork and public recognition? Freedom or control over work? Accuracy? Whatever it is, try insofar as possible to create some of those conditions."

What can I do to help?

Since many of these styles are more predominant in certain industries, Warfield works to tailor her motivational presentations accordingly. "If I were to give the same interactive presentation I give to salespeople to an engineering group, who tend to have more analyzers and connectors, I could hurt my credibility or even immobilize that group," she says.

Warfield also champions another approach to employee motivation in her book, *Outcome Thinking: Getting Results Without the Boxing Gloves*. When it comes to motivation, outcome thinking holds that employees should do more managing of bosses, rather than vice versa.

Managers tend to use unilateral "I think" or "I feel" statements to correct performance problems on staff or to help light a fire under employees, (for example, "I feel you can make stronger contributions to the team" or "I think you can be more enterprising in your work.") But outcome thinking would have managers turn the tables a bit and say, "You know, Mark, it's important to me that everyone here feels they can bring all their skills, talent and passion to work every day and feel valued and challenged. Is this a place where you think you can do that? If not, what can I do to help make it that place? What am I doing to inhibit you?" Warfield says.

"Employees often scream out for managers to know them, understand them, recognize them, even tell them what to do, but managers can't possibly be that deep inside everyone's head. This approach makes employees manage their own

motivation, with the manager as facilitator. It's much better if a manager has 30 people trying to manage her, rather than her trying to manage 30 people."

Dave Zielinski is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to *Presentations* magazine.

Originally published in the May 2001 issue of *Presentations* magazine. If you would like a copy of this issue contact the Circulation Department at 800.707.7749 or circwork@billcom.com.

Return to [The Audience](#)

[Speaking Tips](#) | [The Audience](#) | [The Room](#)

[Creating](#) | [Delivering](#) | [Technology](#)

[Home](#) | [Search](#) | [Resources](#)



This site and all its content
© Bill Communications Inc.
[Comments or questions?](#)